

## **The Mother of All Murder Mysteries: Los misterios de Laura**

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## ARTICLE – FILM

# The Mother of All Murder Mysteries: *Los misterios de Laura*

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Police Inspector Laura Lebel, divorced mother of twins, with a disorganised personal and professional life is an unlikely heroine for a police procedural. Yet not only does she solve every murder mystery with uncanny ease, she is one of Television Española's (Spanish State Television) poster girls of success. As an extreme example of genre hybridization (police procedural, murder mystery, sitcom, workplace and family drama), there is something for everybody in the identification process and entertainment value, thus maximising the target audience, bringing the whole family to reunite in front of the TV set. This article explores if and how female identities are still embedded in a phallogentric imaginary and to what extent this series breaks the conventions of crime drama. To this end I discuss Cawelti's now classic notions on the social function of formula culture such as murder mysteries and combine them in a fruitful discussion with Plantinga's concepts of character engagement and concern-based construals. Plantinga's analysis of the emotional viewing experience allows us to take seriously a popular TV show that might otherwise be decried for its cheap emotionalism. This article fills a significant critical gap in the field of Spanish visual culture. Positioned at the intersection between Hispanic Studies, gender studies and TV studies, it gives space to a productive cross-fertilisation of theories of spectatorship, comedy, and formula culture. It thus fulfils a dual purpose of contributing to both Hispanic Studies and the international body of gender and TV Studies. Central to my discussion will be the issue of women in the workplace and the perennial question of how professional women negotiate the public/private divide.

Our approaches and methodologies  
may change, but the questions remain the same:  
What do we mean by female, femininity and feminism?  
(McCabe and Akass 116)

## Introduction

Police dramas are without doubt one of the most important genres on television, both in terms of their representation of social issues and through the way they reflect ideological changes in the world at large. Together with medical dramas and mini-series about political corruption, crime dramas are the most watched form of workplace drama on Spanish TV.

By their very nature, they invite a judgmental viewing process and encourage viewers actively to participate in finding justice.<sup>1</sup> Ideologically, they serve to imitate male authority: police officers as personification of the state apparatus. While the law enforcement officer, in general, is one of the most-represented professions on Spanish TV, female officers are under-represented. This is partly due to social reality; it was not until 1971 that a woman entered the Spanish police force.<sup>2</sup> With its inherently male-dominated, conservative worldview, the police force is hardly imaginable as fertile ground for a feminist space – which is precisely why female detectives might serve to introduce a timely feminist re-evaluation of this situation for a mass audience. Fictional females in positions of (legal) power, and in a profession that is supposedly based on rational thinking and detection skills, have role-model potential. What better way to introduce the female gaze into popular culture and thus disturb male-dominated narratives?<sup>3</sup> The police procedural with a female protagonist is thus not so much about matters of criminology but rather the ideological changes around gender issues – the police force as a metonymy for the wider social environment.

Police Inspector Laura Lebel, divorced mother of twins with a disorganised personal and professional life, at first appears an unlikely heroine for a police procedural. Yet not only does she solve every murder mystery with uncanny ease, she is also one of Television Española's poster girls. The pilot episode of *Los misterios de Laura/The Mysteries of Laura* (hereafter *ML*) screened on 15 June 2009, achieving higher viewing figures than its rival (airing that same evening) *CSI*. Originally conceived as only one series of six episodes, it ran to a total of 32 episodes over three series (2009–2014), becoming one of the most successful TV series at a time of unprecedented economic crisis, perhaps due to it offering some escapism. A refreshing alternative to pessimistic crime shows, *ML* lends itself to being feel-good TV, offering viewers a much more optimistic worldview.<sup>4</sup> What might have started out as simply an entertaining show, resulted in a masterpiece of the female gaze: Season 1 (2009, six episodes) reached an audience of 2–3 million (12–16% of audience share); season 2 (2011, 13 episodes), 2.4–3.7 million viewers (12–20% of share); season 3 (2014, 13 episodes), 3–6 million viewers (15–30% of share).<sup>5</sup> Why was *ML* (Boomerang TV, Spain) so popular and successful? One obvious reason for its huge success is that it defies genre conventions. As an extreme example of genre hybridisation (police procedural, murder mystery, sitcom, workplace and family drama), there is entertainment value for everybody, thereby maximising the target audience and bringing the whole family together in front of the TV set. Moreover, powerful signifiers of both femininity and feminism can be found in the series, although these binaries are constantly, and very elegantly, contested.

This article explores if and how female identities are still embedded in a phallogentric imaginary and to what extent *ML* breaks the conventions of crime drama. To this end, I consider Cawelti's now classic notions on the social function of formula culture, such as murder mysteries, and combine them in a fruitful discussion with Plantinga's concepts of character

<sup>1</sup> I allude to Orit Kamir's notion of 'film as judgment' and extend it to crime shows. Kamir posits that some law films train audiences in the active execution of judgment. See, in particular, Kamir (xii–xix), where she explains that engaging viewers naturally involves cinematic choices regarding genre, editing, narration, plots, points of view and casting, to create an emotional link between characters and viewers.

<sup>2</sup> This compares to 1905 in Germany and 1911 in the UK.

<sup>3</sup> I follow Gamman and Marshment's (3), definition of the female gaze as 'a female perspective which controls situations and their definitions in the mainstream'.

<sup>4</sup> Following Plantinga's approach, I use the terms 'viewer', 'spectator' and 'audience' interchangeably to refer to actual or hypothetical persons. Plantinga's discussion of screen theory's confusion between hypothetical (constructed by the text) and actual (real-life viewers) spectatorship is enlightening. For an exhaustive discussion on terminology, see Plantinga (16–17).

<sup>5</sup> See *Los misterios de Laura* entry on the Formula TV website for viewing figures.

engagement and concern-based construals.<sup>6</sup> His analysis of the emotional viewing experience allows us to take seriously a popular TV show that might otherwise be decried for its cheap emotionalism. Hence, the viewer might distance themselves intellectually from the TV show, rather than emotionally engage with it.

This article fills a significant critical gap in the field of Spanish visual culture. Positioned at the intersection between Hispanic Studies, Gender Studies and TV Studies, it gives space to a productive cross-fertilisation of theories on spectatorship, comedy and formula culture. It thus fulfils a dual purpose of contributing to both Hispanic Studies and the international corpus of Gender and TV Studies. Central to my exploration will be the issue of women in the workplace and the perennial question of how professional women negotiate the public/private divide. In *ML*, female performance is a juggling act of having two jobs – those of inspector and mother – and thus evokes the female gaze. However, Gamman warns us that the female gaze can be a mask for a male point of view. She ponders whether when ‘the female gaze is articulated in the context of masculinist ideologies like law and order and individualism? [...] Is it only available [...] through mockery, which disrupts the male gaze? Or are there moments in the text when the female gaze is really dominant?’ (Gamman 19). To shed light on these questions through narrative analysis, this article will first contextualise police procedurals with particular reference to *Petra Delicado* (1999), the hard-boiled detective precursor to Laura, in order to offer the reader televisual reference points. Secondly, I examine the genre hybridisation of murder mystery and comedy workplace-and-family drama to explore how the different genre elements result in a fruitful synergy, leading to televisual success while reconciling feminist and feminine issues. Thirdly, I offer a close reading of episode nine, where these issues are played out in the microcosm of a single paradigmatic episode.<sup>7</sup>

### The Spanish televisual landscape of crime dramas

Spain is often considered a poor relation in Europe. Foreign cultural products, such as imported TV shows, are more likely to be considered high quality than their domestic equivalent, even by home audiences. In marked contrast to this assumption, Spanish production companies are among the highest exporters, overtaking France and Germany (Smith 14). *ML*, specifically, has been sold to Holland, Italy and Russia. Most recently, the American network NBC adapted the series, with Debra Messing as the female lead. The scriptwriters, Javier Holgado and Carlos Vila, attributed their success to Laura’s personality and the calibre of the actors.<sup>8</sup> The regular cast includes distinguished actors such as María Pujalte (Laura), Fernando Guillén Cuervo (Jacobo), Oriol Tarrasón (Martín) and Beatriz Carvajal (Maribel), joined by other renowned actors in regular guest appearances. Javier Pascual, assistant director of public broadcasting service Televisión Española, explains that the creative journey was a Spanish–American synergy. The scriptwriters were heavily influenced by the American classics and, to a degree, their scripts can be read as a parodic homage to the Anglophone greats.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> I use the term ‘character engagement’ in the sense of ‘mental responses viewers have in relation to film characters’ (Plantinga 111). See also p. 103, where he explains that the usual term ‘identification’ tends to suggest erroneously that a full identification with the characters – like a ‘Vulcan mind meld’ – is possible. Meanwhile, Plantinga’s key concept of ‘concern-based construals’ refers to ‘transient disturbances, initiated by the subject’s construal or appraisal of a disruptive situation that relates to the subject’s concerns’ (Plantinga 34).

<sup>7</sup> The close-reading method originates in literary studies and refers to a detailed analysis of a specific part of the text, in this instance one episode of the series.

<sup>8</sup> ‘[To our surprise] we have been able to generate interest in the US with a kind of series that they already have over there. So there has to be something special for them to like it. [...] We think it’s Laura’s personality and the performance of the actors’ (Holgado and Vila, my own translations throughout).

<sup>9</sup> ‘Our series was influenced by the American classics, so it is a source of pride and great joy that it has travelled to the USA. Entering the American market is quite an achievement, particularly since it’s going to be on primetime

In the 1990s and 2000s, homegrown police dramas were at their peak. The audience might therefore be familiar with the most successful action-packed, fast-paced, and conservative, crime drama *Policías* (Antena 3, 2000–2003) and/or the more liberal and longest running *El comisario/The Superintendent* (Telecinco, 1999–2009). Both fail the ‘representation-of-women-officers’ test, as does one of the most successful crime comedies *Los hombres de Paco/Paco’s Men* (Antena 3, 2005–2010). In the latter, however, there is a long-running storyline of a lesbian relationship between a female officer and the forensic scientist. On an international level, the Spanish crime audience is familiar with Agatha Christie murder mysteries, *Columbo* and *Murder, She Wrote*, as well as various forensic crime dramas (*CSI, NCIS*).<sup>10</sup> In general gender terms, the televisual backdrop is mixed. Women are very present on the TV screen as anchors of news programmes, serious talk shows or light-hearted afternoon magazines. They are also the protagonists in the daily *culebrones*/soap operas, in their familiar habitat of love stories. However, recent studies on gender in Spanish TV shows (Galán Fajardo; Lacalle and Gómez) reveal the dearth of female protagonists – and female police officers especially are conspicuous by their absence in the history of Spanish TV drama. It is against this backdrop that we also need to consider Laura’s success.

Spectators with a knowledge of crime TV will subconsciously relate *ML* to earlier representations of female law enforcement officers in order to reflect on Laura’s performance, the social development of career women and a plethora of storylines revolving around women’s issues. Internationally, the first generation of female police officers – both real and fictional – had to sacrifice their femininity and likeability on their journey to the top (Brunsdon 383); and the eponymous *Petra Delicado* (1999), Spain’s first fictional *inspectora*, was no exception to that rule. Reminiscent of Jane Tennison in *Prime Suspect* (1991–2006) in its portrayal of a hardened police officer, *Petra Delicado* reveals key realities for women – specifically, what it is like to live in a post-feminist era while still coping with inequality.<sup>11</sup> *Petra Delicado* herself is an ambiguous character: she has professional and social autonomy, but her position in the police force ‘renders those autonomies of questionable authenticity’ (Godsland 40), since the patriarchal order is still omnipresent. It also flags issues of incompatibility in terms of professional development, motherhood and marriage: this first Spanish female protagonist of a hardboiled detective drama chose her career over motherhood.

Attractive and self-confident, *Delicado* (marvellously interpreted by renowned actress Ana Belén) is a commanding representation of a female professional in a position of power. As her name suggests, she is both strong and delicate in everything she does.<sup>12</sup> Sensitive in her manner of solving cases, she can also be harsh, stern and decisive in the rough, macho world of a police station. She uses her status as token woman to introduce unconventional methods of law enforcement and it is here that she is most like Laura. However, comparisons between the two female police officers reveal more differences than similarities, and this might, in part, explain Laura’s success as an endearing character. Where *Petra* is a hardboiled macho woman who uses strong language and is in love with (the power of) her gun, Laura is a ‘cosy’, softly spoken detective who never wields a gun – other than carrying it around in her handbag like a fashion accessory. While *Petra* has no appetite to fight for recognition of her investigative skills, Laura is hailed as the ‘best detective in the *comisaría*’. When *Petra* observes the rules, Laura bends them, sometimes because of an over-developed empathy for the (innocent) sus-

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TV on one of the main broadcasters of the country. It is the first time that the NBC has adapted a Spanish series and the positive reactions were immediate’ (Pascual). Goyo Quintana, general director of Boomerang TV, has called this success ‘a historical milestone for our fiction’ (Goyo Quintana).

<sup>10</sup> For further details, see Louis.

<sup>11</sup> For an excellent analysis of *Prime Suspect*, see Jermyn.

<sup>12</sup> *Petra* from the Latin word for ‘rock’; *Delicado* means delicate.

pects. While Petra indulges in the post-feminist pleasures of shopping and interior design, Laura's outer appearance is usually dishevelled and her private life revolves around the *doble jornada*/double shift of bringing up twins. Interestingly, Petra, despite being a macho police officer, is submissive to her ex-husband. Laura is fair, firm and kind to hers, while leaving him in no doubt that the marriage is over. The notion that women have to be 'angels of the house' as well as professionally successful does not apply to Laura; she is a domestic disaster.<sup>13</sup> In fact, the role of domestic help is often, rather badly, handled by her mother. Nevertheless, one thing is true for both women officers: 'even when a female police officer is featured, it is her isolation and also her uniqueness that prevail' (Gamman 11).

### **Feminine attributes, masculine traits: reconciling the binaries**

In this section, I explore the concepts of femininity and feminism in *ML*,<sup>14</sup> and how this manifests itself in Laura's professional performance and private life through her relationships with the other main characters. Laura can be read metonymically as an example of a professional woman at a historical point when women can have both family and careers. Unlike her fictional precursors such as Miss Marple, Jessica Fletcher or Petra Delicado, Laura Lebel has two sons. This *doble jornada*/double shift that is a mother's daily life, is a staple element of every episode. The mix of narrative strands usually combines deep-level plot lines (concerning Laura's private life) and surface stories (the mysteries) that are concluded by the end of the episode. This is enhanced through cross-cutting between a single familiar location (Laura's flat) and the police station, as well as exterior locations. The constant blurring of boundaries means that the teamwork in the police station also appears to be a sort of family operation – furthermore, both 'families' are equally dysfunctional. Laura's femininity manifests itself through her genuine care for colleagues and family members. She is motherly and has a non-confrontational communication style, as she listens sympathetically to both suspects and co-workers. As audience, we become part of the police family; the weekly episodes start to etch themselves into our memory after only a few viewings and give us a sense of connection and belonging.

At the beginning of each episode, the murder mystery appears unfathomable. But there are just enough concrete clues to suggest wrongdoing and to warrant a murder investigation – at least that is what Laura's instinct unfailingly suggests. As a Lebel (or 'hound') she literally smells crime. A recurring feature is a discussion with her colleagues, who suggest there is not enough evidence to pursue a particular case – a common trope in crime shows. At this moment, Laura's tenacity and ambition will prove her colleagues wrong. Her outstanding abilities as police inspector can be read on a symbolic level as a manifestation of professional technical skills (the ability to solve murders). Despite her inimitable scatter-brained style, Laura solves each mystery with brilliant Sherlock Holmes-style attention to detail (a faded lampshade in a dark corner which indicates that somebody moved the lamp; coffee stains on a table next to the coasters reveal that a stranger has been in the flat; the degrees marked on an air-conditioning thermostat different to the default setting proving that somebody else was in the house). She uses intuition while discarding forensic science. Female intuition is

<sup>13</sup> The 'angel of the house' discourse was first culturally engineered in the nineteenth century, then appropriated by the Franco regime (1939–75) to keep women in the home.

<sup>14</sup> A thorough discussion of the various takes on feminism is beyond the scope of this article. I agree with Lotz's assertion that '[c]onfusion and contradiction mark understandings of feminism [...] Surveying the terrain of both feminist theory and popular discussions of feminism, we seem to have entered an alternate language universe where words can simultaneously connote a meaning and its opposite, where labels are more significant than theory behind the label' (Lotz 2).

literally written into the mystery format, both in the form of professional success as well as being a source for ridicule.

While by no means a classic career woman, nevertheless markers of feminism manifest themselves in Laura. She is routinely referred to as ‘the best police officer in the station’ – and as a woman in a male-dominated profession this is an even more impressive achievement. She wears her fame lightly, and – out of modesty – rejects compliments from her fictional fanbase. Women officers provoke a wide range of fandom and fantasies – in our example both diegetically and non-diegetically. Reference to her professional prominence is such a frequent occurrence that this recognition rubs off on us as viewers through character engagement. As such, Laura can be read as a positive televisual role-model for today’s young professional women, who can enjoy Spain’s feminist achievements but no longer need to pit femininity against feminism. Indeed, Laura teaches us that femininity and feminism are not mutually exclusive: family commitments can go hand in hand with professional success.

Laura was born in 1968, so her generation would have been teenagers and young adults during (and after) Spain’s Transition from dictatorship to democracy (1975–1982), when women received equal rights before the law.<sup>15</sup> Feminist change here was radical and – in historical terms – swift. Reduced to being just wife and mother during Franco’s dictatorship, Laura’s generation would have witnessed this radical change of possibilities from housewife to potential public power in their prime years. While there are many markers of femininity in Laura’s attitudes and behaviour, *ML* is self-conscious about its feminist agenda. Gender as a theme is introduced in broader cognisance of the changing social conditions of women, rather than in the form of radical, and overt, feminist manifestations. As John Ellis rightly argues:

Television is often at its best [...] when it does not confront social problems directly, and does not seek to articulate a particular position in a programmatic way. [For example in the form of ...] a feminist sensibility expressed in a way that allows a broad range of people to enter into it without quite knowing what it is. (Ellis 87)

*ML* does not deal with the conflict between career and personal life, but rather with the struggle to hold them together – not so much a ‘having it all’ and more of a ‘coping with it all’. As viewers witness Laura’s ‘double shift’, they ponder whether she can successfully combine murder mysteries and motherhood. To a certain extent, Laura is reminiscent of anti-heroines like Bridget Jones or Ally McBeal, where the characterisations are as much about their failures as their successes. Laura is an ambiguous heroine for sure, but she is the one who regularly has the last laugh, when she solves yet another mystery through her feminine intuition and stubborn belief in her professional abilities.

This story of a woman detective is by definition non-conformist, in the sense that the narrative does not lead to love and marriage. When romance occurs, however, it is likely to be a problem (Mizejewski 12). Another blurring between the public and the private appears in the character of Chief Inspector Jacobo Salgado (Fernando Guillén Cuervo), Laura’s immediate superior and ex-husband. Ongoing disagreements about childcare and Laura’s residual hurt caused by his infidelity colour their working relationship. Jacobo does not miss any opportunity to tell Laura that she cannot cope, making the children typical pawns in the divorce game. Yet he regularly loses these battles.

<sup>15</sup> Strictly speaking, the Spanish Constitution of 1931 was the first to grant equal rights to women. The Second Republic (1931–36) in Spain boasted one of the most modern European democracies, before the outbreak of the Civil War (1936–39). These laws were repealed as soon as Franco came to power.



To a certain extent, police procedurals are reminiscent of buddy movies, with the inspectors and their sidekicks. Martín Maresca (Oriol Tarrasó), Laura's much younger sidekick, is ever the charmer, flirting with most women (including suspects) and mischievously enjoying to blur the lines between duty and pleasure. He regularly visits Laura at home to discuss cases while playing with the twins. He has strong affection for his boss, bordering on romantic feeling; this allows for playful sexual tension between the two as a recurring theme, adding a mystery element to this professional and personal friendship too. The mystery is revealed in the final episode: an anonymous online admirer who blogs about Laura's superior sleuthing talents on a fan website is exposed as Martín. And it goes both ways: their rapport and loyalty are absolute, they would die for each other.

One of *ML*'s main deviations from the classic mystery formula is the role reversal: Laura displays the superior mind (Holmes figure), while her male sidekick Martín adopts the role of a comical (Watson-esque) figure. The audience is often as perplexed as Martín and hence shares his scepticism about Laura's seemingly flawed theories. This narrative viewpoint is deliberate: we witness the inspector's actions but are not privy to her reasoning process (other than her facial expressions reflecting a slow, profound and painful thought process during close-ups). Thus, the scriptwriters are able to send the viewer off course and stop them from solving the crime ahead of the dénouement – keeping the moment of solution and dramatic climax for the inspector (Cawelti 85). After the usual parade of witnesses and suspects the viewer feels lost in evidence and counter-evidence, but we are afforded just enough participation to appreciate the detective's superior intellectual abilities. In the crime solution scene, Laura will usually reveal at length (over at least ten minutes of screen time) why and how the crime was committed, putting the seemingly random evidence into logical order, filling the gaps in our understanding. The tension during these revelations is intense, making the viewer admire her intelligence and professionalism. While Laura reconstructs the crime, the camera moves nervously from suspect to suspect, still throwing us off the scent through close-up shots of the wrong person. More often than not, the murderer is the least likely person, a convention that developed due to two reasons: firstly, to divert the viewer's attention and, secondly, to make sure we do not sympathise with the criminal but rather with the innocent suspects (Cawelti 85–90).

Identity construction is also achieved through a feminine/feminist comparison: Laura's main antagonist, Lydia Martínez (Laura Pamplona), is the exact opposite of our heroine – she is emotionless, systematic and relies on forensic evidence. Visually, her power suits convert her into a stereotypically feminist personification of a career woman. At formal occasions when uniforms are de rigueur, Lydia dons trousers, while Laura wears a skirt, signalling a clear generational gap between female officers. With her analytical approach, Lydia should be the winner of all tacit professional contests, but very much to our viewing pleasure she is frequently outwitted by Laura. Intuition and old-style detective work bear out over modern forensic science – an interesting clash of old and new police methods, personified by two policewomen and a comical indictment of popular forensic crime shows.

While both Agatha Christie and Arthur Conan Doyle successfully incorporated comically eccentric characters into their narratives, *ML* takes this to another level by using comedic elements more visibly and, above all, by making the protagonist the butt of jokes among colleagues and suspects. To a certain extent Laura is reminiscent of the cosy detective Miss Marple: well mannered and optimistic, always looking for a humane way of explaining murder motives. She is not burnt out by the occupational habit of seeing only the evil in people. On the contrary, she is trusting and gullible in everyday situations, and thus endearing to the viewer. Her quiet self-confidence is partly demonstrated through her self-mockery when trying to put suspects and colleagues at ease. The femininity/feminism binary is nowhere more



rapidly deconstructed than in her Columbo-style apparent stupidity when she lulls suspects into a false sense of security, turning this into razor-sharp detection skills when she believes they want to misinform her. She then demonstrates her astuteness and determination, running rings around the startled suspects. Laura's self-deprecating humour runs through every scene; she is a woman who takes her job but not herself seriously. This serves two purposes: on a diegetic level, she portrays herself as a mediocre professional in order not to make her colleagues feel inadequate; and when dealing with suspects, it is used to lure them into a false sense of security. On a non-diegetic level, however, there is a danger that this device plays with the stereotype of incompetent women, reinforcing outdated constructs rather than challenging them.

The constant fusion of Laura's superior sleuthing skills, her physical clumsiness and her stressful private life as a mother makes her character human and relatable. As an 'ironic detective' (Mesropova), Laura's narratives are interspersed with comedic value and slapstick, using formulaic humour motifs. Conceptual surprise is a staple comedy technique, often employed when the private and professional are blurred.<sup>16</sup> For example, in episode one a close-up Laura seems to be cross-examining a suspect during a shot/reverse shot sequence, until the camera moves into a medium shot and we realise that she is interrogating the butcher about being short-changed. Likewise, her clumsiness makes her look particularly amateurish when accidentally contaminating the crimes scene or handling her gun like a novice. This does not inspire confidence in her marksmanship and reduces the gun to being a random item in her handbag, playing with clichés around women's large handbags.

Many comic scenes are written around Laura's mother Maribel del Bosque (Beatriz Carvajal), a caricature of an overpowering and meddling matriarch. Laura finds her master in her incomparable mother, for it is she who often inadvertently drives the detective work forward.<sup>17</sup> The lightbulb moment – which leads to the most unlikely connections being made between seemingly spurious evidence – is regularly brought about by an off-the-record conversation between mother and daughter as they share household chores. The mother's function is that of an innocent bystander outside the police station, who approaches the mystery with nosy nonchalance and common sense. She is hence closest to the viewer's own position as we guess what is going to happen next and try to predict the identity of the murderer.

Comedy can be read in different ways; some scholars (Lotz, Rabinovitz) consider it an ideal format for a feminist subject position, since 'the narrative and generic qualities [...] both introduce and then contain potentially subversive content' (Lotz 111).<sup>18</sup> Through character engagement, the viewer might fall in love with the role-model of a super-successful sleuth, but as soon as we get used to our vicarious success it is taken away from us through the comic relief of Laura being a walking disaster in her private life. Other scholars more positively contend that comedy is a forum in which complex concepts can be articulated successfully, precisely because the stakes are so low (Jenkins). Comedy is thus a liminal space in which social change can be imagined, as it plays with audience expectations (Mizejewski, Gilbert). This interpretative space and the character's ambiguities permit multiple readings. In popular culture, as in life, professional masterminds might not be suitable as role-models, because this does not allow for moments of weakness and so women might feel inadequate in comparison. On the other hand, representations of strong women can also 'serve as powerful role models for female spectators, offering them pleasurable viewing and identificatory opportunities'

<sup>16</sup> See Buijzen and Valkenburg for a detailed typology of humour.

<sup>17</sup> The show was initially going to be named 'Madres y detectives' (Mothers and Detectives) in an allusion to Laura's double duties as well as the relationship with her meddling mother.

<sup>18</sup> See also Rabinovitz (54), where she states that 'the subversive potential of comedy can ultimately be trumped by the generic constraints of the narrative of the sit-com.' See also Mellencamp and Swink.

(Gamman 11). Interestingly, when asked what makes *ML* such a successful TV series, female police officers stated that it is precisely this ridiculous mix of private and professional daily challenges that makes it realistic: 'we really have the gun next to the child's dummy in our handbags.'<sup>19</sup>

Although the visual humour is often performed by Laura, the subtler jokes are frequently at the expense of the male characters. Laura's identity is also partly constructed by contrast to the mock-machos: mock-jock womaniser Martín, Jacobo – a police chief who would prefer to be a stay-at-home dad – and Cuevas (César Camino), the stupid rookie. The latter's youth and lack of experience make him an easy target for criminals and colleagues alike. He is the only main character who is called by his surname, Cuevas, suggestive of a teacher–student relationship with all of his colleagues. Laura takes him under her wing in a motherly fashion, giving him a chance to develop and contribute to murder theories. Looking at the forensic evidence, he then reliably comes up with the most bizarre interpretations of possible murder plots, thus parodying the mystery drama genre itself. Gamman reminds us that '[m]ockery as a strategy rejects any simple subject position [...] mockery disrupts rather than assumes dominance' (Gamman 17). Men are easy targets for Laura, Lydia and Maribel. As Hanke rightly points out, in mock-macho TV shows 'this discursive strategy updates masculinity by putting the signs of masculinity into a co-motion with the shifting horizon of our expectations' (Hanke 90). Laura regularly puts Jacobo in his place when he abuses his position of power. She also uses mockery when Martín has slept with yet another suspect, just as Jacobo has to endure Maribel's sarcastic venom when she finds out that her daughter's marriage broke down because of his affair with Lydia. Humour here comes in the form of amusing quips about male aspirations for control. Mainstream genres can facilitate a dominant female gaze and provide a route whereby feminist meanings can be effectively introduced to a wide audience (Gamman 12). Laura, as comedy character and agent of change, has a twofold strategy: in fleeting moments of seriousness she gently dismantles mock-macho behaviour, while the comic relief is part of a winning formula for sleuthing success. Series with such role reversal must constantly demonstrate how a female can possibly fill such a role and Laura does so with admirable ease. More importantly, our character engagement with her as vicarious wish fulfilment results in the ultimate pleasure for the female viewer: Laura is a natural who makes professional success look easy and so we want to be her.

### **'The Mystery of the Man who Never Existed'**

Detective stories, like Westerns, are contemporary male epics in which the protagonist has power, superior knowledge and all the entitlement of the ruling class. The classic detective story became the most popular form of fantasising about crime in the late nineteenth century (Cawelti 54–55). The disassociation of religion and law that emerged in that period allowed the reader to view crime in artistic rather than moral terms. Stories of sin and retribution so common in world literature gave way to intellectual pleasure and emotional stimulation derived from the solving of the crime. By reducing the danger of crime to an intellectual game it was converted into something completely under our control, satisfying the moral fantasy of a search for truth (Cawelti 43). This also establishes the view that crime is based on individual wrongdoing and not broader social issues. Despite the risk of boredom through repetition, and hence low ratings, murder mysteries continue to sell, both in literature and on TV – making these formats fairly safe returns on investment for production companies. Indeed, looking at TV schedules in Spain, we find a predominance of formula stories (crime

<sup>19</sup> For more details, see the entry on *Los misterios de Laura* on the website of the Cuerpo Nacional de Policía (National Police Force).

shows, law shows, medical dramas, prison dramas), whether home grown or imported (Louis). What makes us want to hear familiar stories? Standard conventions create a link between scriptwriters and their audience, who find pleasure and emotional security in a familiar cultural product. However, it is also vital to keep changing the formula slightly to give the viewer sufficient novelty to reduce the danger of boredom. John Cawelti (16) explains this apparent paradox with two opposing psychological needs: risk and order in equal measure. Viewers require moments of excitement in order not to be bored, while simultaneously escaping from the insecurities of their own lives by witnessing closure in each episode. A balance must be struck between high-culture mimesis and low-culture escapism. Hence, formulas become a 'collective cultural product because they successfully articulate a pattern of fantasy that is at least acceptable, if not preferred, by the cultural group who enjoys them' (Cawelti 34). The recurrent themes of the formula function are a means to achieve cultural stability, while the solution of mysteries demands an active audience. However, in hybrid genre shows such as *ML* only some viewers will focus on clues and the narratives resulting from these clues, trying to predict cause and effect, while others will lose interest in the minutiae of evidence and focus on other subplots. Through both plot and subplots, the audience can imagine stepping across cultural boundaries, thus helping to alter values and dismantle outdated constructs (Cawelti 36). In *ML* the familiar mystery format is used to introduce new ideas about female professional skills and success as well as including the mystery of a female professional's identity as mother.

In what follows, I analyse 'The Mystery of the Man who Never Existed' through a close reading exercise. Episode nine of *ML* is a pivotal moment in the overarching storylines of the series and one of the richest episodes in terms of what it offers to feminist analysis. In few other episodes has the dual focus between the professional and private persona of the inspector been so extensively and psychologically imbricated. Three recurring themes come to full development here: the ongoing divorce battle with Laura's husband Jacobo; her core values of empathy, compassion and an ethic of care;<sup>20</sup> and Laura's superior sleuthing talent paired with an unprecedented tenacity to win both the professional and private battles of the sexes. This revolves around three intertwined cases: the mystery of a false identity case; a wife-murder case led by Lydia and Cuevas; and in the private sphere, a joint-custody case between Jacobo and Laura. There is a striking frequency of cross-cutting between the three storylines, attesting to their interconnectedness and common denominator: relationships in crisis. Unlike in other episodes, almost equal screen time is given to both criminal cases. The structure keeps to the standard five parts: a teaser presented as a cold open in which the mystery gets introduced (scenes 1–4); the exposition (scenes 5–9) in which all of the above storylines are introduced in turn; the long section of obstacles (scenes 10–25) in which each case becomes complicated and seemingly unsolvable; the resolution (scenes 26–36) in which Laura presents the solution/s to the intertwined cases; and finally the happy ending and cliff-hanger in which order has almost been restored. Interestingly, the first exposition scene is set in Laura's flat, when Jacobo and Laura bicker about their respective stubbornness and the need to go to a custody conciliation meeting, setting the underlying tone for the entire episode. This time the private subplot is not an 'unthreatening soap opera' (Mesropova 272), but a case that seriously troubles Laura's wellbeing.

The emotional viewing process is particularly important in episode nine. Hence, my analysis covers three lines of enquiry: the narrative, the viewing process and character engagement – with particular reference to Laura's public performance and private life. Given that

<sup>20</sup> I refer to Carol Gilligan's seminal work *In a Different Voice*, in which she conceptualises an 'ethic of care' as a relational and context-bound approach to moral issues.

'emotions are a process; they change and flow over time' (Plantinga 80), I structure my analysis in accordance with the televisual narrative and paradigm scenarios. According to Carl Plantinga, the elicitation of emotions in both visual culture and real life depends on paradigm scenarios, that is, types and sequences of events that are associated with certain emotions.<sup>21</sup> The scenarios chosen here, furthermore, are paradigmatic within this particular episode. Plantinga distinguishes between global (anticipation, suspense and curiosity) and local (startle, surprise, disgust, elation and excitement) emotions. The former typically span significant portions of an episode, while the latter are brief in duration. Local emotions that are concerned with characters are either sympathetic (compassion, pity, admiration) or anti-pathetic (anger, disdain, sociomoral disgust) (Plantinga 69). What, then, are the prevalent emotions in this episode? The complicated storylines keep our global emotions, particularly suspense and curiosity, running on overdrive throughout the episode. As will become clear in what follows, suspense is a vital ingredient in the construction of the narratives. The mystery genre, Plantinga contends, is the height of 'cognitive play', the intellectual puzzle of the whodunnit, void of emotions (Plantinga 23). However, this particular TV text proves that suspense can be part of murder mysteries too, since it clearly stimulates the viewer's interest by generating curiosity, doubt and surprise. After all, suspense is a creative must and rests on the viewer's changing plot predictions: is a particular character guilty or innocent, right or wrong? Inherent in the mystery format is a heightened curiosity about the solution of the crimes; yet as Cawelti rightly points out, it is an 'aestheticizing of crime', which is perceived as a game (Cawelti 99). The audience celebrates intelligence as an inherent value, but also gains a vicarious satisfaction in the solution to the mystery. We derive pleasure from sleuthing, from discovering new information and, above all, from our character engagement with Laura in which we enjoy the sleuth's intellectual prowess.<sup>22</sup> By episode nine we have become fans of Laura's inimitable detection methods and are emotionally attached to her. Our anxiety, and hence suspense, is linked to Laura's performance, since there is a risk that she faces both private and public defeat. Intense yet brief paradigm scenarios also give rise to local emotions of compassion, pity and admiration, as well as disgust, anger and contempt. First and foremost, the viewing process elicits compassion and pity for Laura and Leticia, the victim in the false identity case. This episode is no laughing matter and it is noteworthy that the comic relief elements are very toned down. We also feel admiration for Laura's tenacity, mingled with anger aimed at her antagonists. Sociomoral disgust is predominant in the scenes about the wife-murder case. Finally, we feel compassion for, and anger on behalf of, Laura in her custody battle. I now examine the three cases in turn.

Laura helps the famous artist Leticia Villar find her fiancé Iván, who disappeared shortly before the wedding. Most of Laura's colleagues give little credence to the story, perceiving Leticia as a hysterical and hurt woman. Unlike most episodes, the viewer knows more than Laura – like a voyeur from a secret vantage point we have seen the mystery man in the cold open. Crime dramas, like law films, invite viewers to take on a sociocultural persona and become part of an imagined policing community that shares 'collective hopes, dreams, beliefs [and] anxieties' (Plantinga 2–3). Laura is the only one who gives Leticia the benefit of the doubt and she takes on the case out of compassion. In the first interview of *la loca*

<sup>21</sup> The psychologist Ronald de Sousa explains: 'Our emotions are learned rather like a language and they have an essentially dramatic structure. [...] Small children learn to identify emotions through paradigm scenarios they see acted out in their lives. [...] Stories, art and culture continue to teach us about emotions later in life.' (Ronald de Sousa qtd. in Plantinga 80–1). See also on p. 34 Plantinga's apposite observation that the language psychologists use to describe emotions is similar to that of screenwriters.

<sup>22</sup> See also Plantinga (21): 'Suspense [...] creates anxiety about whether the desired or feared outcome will occur. Suspense increases until the threat of the feared outcome subsides and the desired outcome is achieved.'

(madwoman) Leticia, Laura's and Martín's contrasting approaches set the scene for the rest of the episode. Martín quickly dismisses her story with the explanation that the illusive fiancé might have chickened out ('isn't it strange to want to get married after only a month of courtship?'), to which Laura (instead of Leticia) replies: 'I went out with my husband for two years before we got married, and now we're divorced, because he slept with another woman', then adding 'and on top of that he now wants to take away my children.' Driven by compassion, Laura has gone into full self-disclosure, blurring the lines between her professional and personal self. Her own hurt becomes apparent and a critical viewer might find her unprofessional or, worse still, think she subconsciously takes on the case to divert from her own pain. Viewers who have gone through similarly traumatic experiences will be able to relate to her pain. This tense moment of character engagement (viewer/Laura) and identification (Laura/Leticia) is quickly interrupted when Martín swiftly pathologises the victim and decides what the most useful intervention would be: 'psychiatrist, pills, cased closed'. As the subsequent dialogue between Laura and Martín shows, Laura's compassion and desire to help people in need forges an emotional link between her and Leticia:

**Laura:** We're going to help her.

**Martín:** Laura, the girl has relationship trouble, that's not our problem.

**Laura:** This isn't a relationship problem, it's a missing-person case.

**Martín** (*ironic voice*): OK, but this time you have to tell me. You have seen something in her clothing... or in her hands, or some gesture... Ah no, don't tell me, it's in her voice.

**Laura:** What are you talking about?

**Martín:** Your deductions. You always fixate on something absurd and in the end you're right.

**Laura:** Well, I'm sorry, this time I don't have any hunch. I just believe her.

Martín's ridicule of Laura's detection skills does not derail her. The dialogue ends with a softly spoken low-key statement of the intuitive variety, so typical of Laura. Having a hunch is the prerogative of the detective, but this needs to be confirmed by evidence. The skilled viewer knows that these seemingly bizarre observations are testament to a Sherlock-style attention to detail. Characteristically, the detective sees 'what others miss and even sees what's missing' (Mizejewski 7). To his credit, Martín begrudgingly admits that Laura is usually right. This dialogue functions metonymically, 'symbolising the ambivalence of her power' (Brunsdon 385). What interests me here is the paradigm scenario of the pathologisation of women and what it means for the female viewer. This is one of the few cases in *ML* in which one of the victims is still alive – a close relationship between investigating officer and target is a novelty within the narratives of the series. The helpless Leticia brings out Laura's ethic of care and drives her to be unconditionally supportive. However, in supporting Leticia, Laura also risks madness by association. To be precise, Laura risks being labelled as an irrational woman by her colleagues, whereas the viewer's position might be different. To us, Leticia actually makes Laura look less mad by comparison. Leticia is an easy target for stereotyping: she comes across as a crazy middle-aged artist, incapable of rational thinking, whose love story is a figment of her imagination. We know differently, but are powerless to influence the plotline.

As the storyline develops, and as genre conventions demand, there is an increasing number of obstacles for Laura to overcome. In a fact-gathering narrative with endless twists and turns, four witnesses are found that do not corroborate Leticia's story. A former friend and even her own sister testify that she used to have serious mental health problems, thereby solidifying the evidence of insanity. Martín feels triumphant and vindicated that for once his assessment was right. The paradigm scenario of the evidence-gathering phase going against the hunch of

the inspector is anxiety-inducing for the viewer. Character engagement with Laura makes us want to solve the case, to help her on her quest for justice and share her frustrations with the setbacks. We also identify with Leticia's frustration and growing despair that nobody believes her, since we know she is telling the truth. Increasing confusion and concern set in, paired with anger about a possible deception. Plantinga's cognitive-perceptual theory suggests that the kind of emotion we attach to a certain event does not depend on its nature but the appraisal of the perceiver, which in turn is influenced by cultural contexts and social conventions (Plantinga 55).<sup>23</sup> His key concept of 'concern-based construals' refers to 'transient disturbances, initiated by the subject's construal or appraisal of a disruptive situation that relates to the subject's concerns' (Plantinga 34). The concern arises from the gap between the desired goals for characters and the actual outcome. As the case develops, the gap widens: instead of Leticia being vindicated, she is presented as insane by two witnesses. Our concern for Laura is similarly serious, since she is rendered insane and incompetent by association. It is not pleasant to be the butt of jokes, a fact Lydia regularly exploits when she puts Laura down so as to assert her superiority through professional behaviour and superior forensic science:

**Laura** (*looking for Leticia*): Have you seen that strange woman who dresses up in a bizarre way?

**Lydia** (*silently gets out a mirror so that Laura can see herself in it*): You are making a fool of yourself with that crazy woman.

**Laura**: Leticia isn't crazy!

**Lydia**: Whatever! Suits me that you waste time with that case.

**Laura** (*looking at a suspect in the background*): Is that the guy who murdered his wife?

**Lydia**: Yes, and I'm the one who's going to send him to jail. I'm solving a *real* crime and then Jacobo can work out who the real police officer is and who's the housewife.

Laura does indeed look more like an artist than a police officer. In a recent study on gender in Spanish TV, Galán Fajardo demonstrates that women are still usually connected to roles that embody physical attractiveness and elegance (Galán Fajardo). In contrast, Laura's casual way of dressing makes her appear unprofessional compared to Lydia's power suits. The binaries of hardboiled police officer or housewife are a recurring motif in Lydia's Manichean worldview. In this paradigm scenario of workplace competitiveness, identity construction works by comparison: in the eyes of Lydia, Laura is as mad as the hysterical victim and this makes her incompetent and inadequate. However, such superiority backfires. The viewer's laughter is at Lydia's expense. She is the self-absorbed professional, who is married to the job and whose empowerment is cosmetic. The vital characteristic of ridicule here is Lydia's self-ignorance.

In the second case, Lydia and Cuevas are tasked with finding enough evidence to charge the powerful entrepreneur Germán Gravinás with the murder of his wife. In this paradigm scenario there is a working assumption that Gravinás is guilty, and the viewer, in line with the investigating officers, would happily declare Gravinás guilty without trial, as he is the archetype of a capitalist brute, a personification of the social class that caused the economic crisis in 2008. His wife asked him for a divorce because she was tired of his endless affairs, so he killed her in a crime of passion. This untouchable entitlement of the ruling class who think they can get away with murder brings to the fore our sociomoral disgust. During a second search of his home, Lydia finds forensic evidence in one of Gravinás's cars: a bloodstain

<sup>23</sup> See also Plantinga (54), where he defines emotion as 'an intentional mental state accompanied by various feelings, physiological arousal and action tendencies'. Also Plantinga (62), where he explains that 'art emotions' are similar to extra-filmic lives, so the emotional responses provoked by fiction are similar to emotions in real life.



on the backseat footwell matches the DNA of his wife. After the customary comic relief of Cuevas innocently asking a dumb question ('whose blood might it be?'), he comes up with a ludicrous theory about the sequence of the murder and the flawed alibi of the husband. Unbeknownst to his colleagues (and the viewers), Cuevas casually gives us the solution to the murder case here – the rookie clown has become a master. Alas, despite forensic evidence, Gravinás dismisses this as circumstantial and arrogantly bulldozes his way out of the police station. Very much to Lydia's chagrin, forensic science does not deliver the wanted results. Here the viewing process is one of confusion; as laypersons we do not understand why forensic evidence cannot deliver justice. As a result, the viewer feels powerless as the gap between construal and concern widens even more, possibly leaving us feeling frustrated with law enforcement itself. We smell a rat and start contemplating corruption as a possible explanation for the inexplicable. The impunity of the ruling class during the financial crisis is a safe assumption and a narrative that circulated in more general terms in the contemporary media and would thus be on the minds of the audience. However, we also feel a certain amount of *Schadenfreude*, since our hunch that Lydia is not the superior professional, and forensics does not have all the answers, has been confirmed.

In a dramatic incidence of the private mingling with the professional, Leticia visits Laura at home one evening, and due to a misunderstanding with Maribel (Laura's mother) Leticia ends up looking after the twins. In comes Jacobo and finds his children with 'that mad woman'. All this comes to a climax during the custody conciliation hearing before a judge. Jacobo lets slip that his sons were looked after by an insane woman, which would constitute a case for the social services and hence the possibility that Laura might lose her children. Rather pertinently, his main argument for joint custody is the children's need for emotional stability, thus mirroring one of the main themes of the episode. The viewer is startled by the bold role-model claim of a parent who, as a husband, betrayed his wife. Demonstrating that Leticia is not insane now becomes crucially important for Laura's own credibility and turns into a private as well as professional obligation. This is the turning point in the episode and the remainder is now very much about validity of evidence in both cases. In the mystery case, Iván's existence can finally be proven through visual evidence. Equally, in the wife-murder case Cuevas finds further visual evidence that weakens Gravinás's alibi, but again this does not suffice. The concern-inducing gap is at its widest here: the distance between the likelihood of justice being served (the ultimate desire of the viewer) and the status quo of impunity. This concern results in our disgust and feelings of powerlessness.

Laura now relies on a lucky coincidence, and her irritating mother, to bring about the lightbulb moment. When Gravinás storms out of the police station, he inadvertently divulges that he knows Leticia and so both cases come together ('Is that what the police do? Accuse innocent people or give the third degree to a limping woman?'). Here the viewer remembers an earlier scene in which Leticia told Laura that she had collided with another car (at the time a seemingly inconsequential comment). This is the missing bit of information and all the pieces of the puzzle start falling into place. Another throwaway remark from her mother claiming to be *compos mentis* ('I'm not dead, not mad and my passport is up-to-date. My witness statement is valid.') makes Laura realise that the case might revolve around an insanity certification to render a prime witness mad.

The solution of the cases then is the ultimate triumph for Laura, and is beautifully placed in the middle of a press conference when Jacobo was supposed to apologise publicly for arresting Gravinás under false pretences. Laura barges in and explains that everything was a stitch-up to silence Leticia, a potential witness for the prosecution. A hit-and-run car accident involving Gravinás and Leticia had left her limping. She recognised the driver and reported him to the police. Gravinás then hired an actor (Iván), who pretended to fall in love with her

in a vile plot to render her insane. Laura's triumph is an all-round hat-trick: she solves two crimes and saves Jacobo from public humiliation. Humbled and grateful he concedes defeat:

**Jacobo:** You won!

**Laura:** It's not about winning or losing. It's about our children.

**Jacobo:** I know. That's why I don't want any conciliation or lawyers anymore. I'd like to keep things as they are.

**Laura:** What made you change your mind?

**Jacobo:** Well, you have demonstrated that you are capable of risking everything for the children... And what have I demonstrated? That I'm capable of putting my foot in it and accusing you of something horrible. I haven't been up to the job of father or husband. And I'd like to change that. Even if I'm far away from my family.

**Laura** (*gives him a hug*): Jacobo, you're never going to be far away!

This paradigm scenario is an example of the many human moments throughout the series, usually dealing with relationships in crisis. The perceptive viewer might recognise this as revealing Jacobo's vulnerability, and Laura, magnanimous in victory, predictably forgives her ex-husband. The viewer's position is ambivalent: on the one hand, we respect Jacobo's honesty, but on the other we, unlike Laura, have not forgotten that only days ago he wanted to take her to court.

To conclude, these are classic storylines in which men form an unholy alliance to dominate women: Gravinás kills his wife in a crime of passion – one of the classic tales in Spanish culture throughout the centuries; Leticia is rendered insane to invalidate her as a witness; Jacobo uses circumstantial evidence to bolster his own court battle. Lydia, Laura's nemesis, adds to the narrative of insanity, and not even Martín, normally so devoted to Laura, can bring himself to be objective towards Leticia. Thanks to Laura's sleuthing skills, ethic of care and stubborn belief in her own intuition, men appear the all-round losers of the episode. However, two details make this reading more ambiguous: Leticia's sister, who tries to abuse her history of mental illness, and Lydia, the hardboiled police officer with an overdeveloped desire to ruin Laura's life. Secondly, in the cliff-hanger segment *comisario* Félix (Jacobo's boss) confides in Laura that he suspects his wife to be having an affair with somebody from the police station and tasks Laura with finding her lover. As Gamman asserts, there is 'no single female gaze in the series, the episodes deal with contradictory ideas about women' (Gamman 22). Most importantly, Laura has been a lone heroine – she has had to fight on her own: Martín who was incredulous, Jacobo in battle mode, Lydia as the perennial enemy, and her mother, who instead of being a help, made matters worse with her irresponsible behaviour of abandoning the twins. The solution to this episode's cases has been her most important success yet. The viewer has the psychic reward of justice being done and Laura secures another professional and private success. We are delighted by Laura's star performance, as she fulfils the role-model function of a strong career woman. She is the powerful maternal figure who fortifies her professional and private families.

## Conclusion

This article has explored female identities in the phallogocentric imaginary of law enforcement. Laura is in a league of her own, a star inspector and humble servant of her families. As a woman cop she is almost unique in the Spanish televisual crime world. Gamman rightly warns us that 'the ideology of sexism can be more subtly articulated through excessive proof of female competence or exceptional ability' (Gamman 11) in the form of the token women who break through the glass ceiling – and this holds true for both Petra Delicado and Laura

Lebrel. However, unlike Delicado, Laura does not have to choose between feminism or femininity, toughness or softness, career or family, success or failure – therein lies her appeal and huge success. The paradigm scenarios let us into the emotional landscape of the series. They elicit emotions in the viewer and allow us vicariously to live through what women endure in professional and private roles. Mainstream formats with a dominant female gaze introduce women's issues to an extent that they cannot be sidelined anymore. The realistic representation of double duties and Laura's ethic of care disrupts the paradigm scenarios of the crime genre and hence the viewer's expectations and meaning-making. The female gaze takes up a range of perspectives in *ML*, all three main women characters (Laura, Lydia and Maribel) are successful women in their own way, if success is measured against male mediocrity.

The comedy format affords interpretative space in order to contest gender binaries. Comedy allows a departure from the norm, playing with the expectations of the audience. 'Women's reconstruction of humour allows [them] to be agents of change' (Hanke 75). *ML* is a fertile playground of gender reconfigurations, while its humour, as a surrealisation of life, still transmits real cultural and social values which can ultimately lead to social change. The perennial question of who is superior and inferior is answered by creating a fair share of laughter-generating scenarios in a gendered way, notwithstanding that she who laughs last, in terms of professional success, is always Laura. In quality TV shows there are multiple narrative strands and hence the gaze is more of a glance (Ellis 137), and comic relief is manifold. Yet it is not only humour that disrupts traditional constructs; the mystery formula itself enables the audience to explore what stepping across boundaries might entail. The 'formula assists in the process of assimilating changes in values to traditional imaginative constructs' (Cawelti 36). *ML* achieves this primarily on two levels: the murder mysteries require the superior mind of the female detective to reach a solution, while her core values of empathy, compassion and an ethic of care give her a certain moral superiority. Murder mysteries are not so much a story of crime but of investigation, and hence the female detective protagonist who outshines her colleagues (and superiors) makes a legitimate claim for women's brilliance in a wider social context. This is an important, and long needed, shift in mainstream representations on Spanish TV and will serve as a conduit for new identities of women in the workplace.

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